



Memorial: Together, Joint Council Fights for Veterans' Issues

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In a first, 21 major veterans' organizations in Virginia have agreed to seven core prioritized legislative objectives and have been working for months to build support for their passage in the 2007 session of the General Assembly. This is welcome news for Virginia's 750,000 veterans and for the active forces, National Guard, Reserve members, and their families in Virginia. This coordinated approach is long past due.

I have worked veterans' legislative issues for the past 14 years as a proponent for the Military Officers Association of America (MOAA) and as a legislative aide. During that period the norm was a wide array of issues and conflicting priorities from various veterans' organizations. Consensus on key issues was the exception, not the rule. Lacking a consensus on legislative priorities made it difficult at best to garner the votes to pass legislation and at worst gave legislators an excuse to ignore veterans' uncertain priorities.

This lack of focus started to change in 2003 with passage of legislation establishing the Joint Leadership Council of Veterans Service Organizations (JLC). Under the dynamic chairmanship of Connie O'Neill (American Legion) and subsequently Frank Wickersham (MOAA), the 21-member JLC, representing 250,000 members in Virginia, became a potent organization able to build a prioritized agenda. All veterans, and the larger military family, are benefiting from a dynamic and energized JLC.

2006 Was a Great Year

While 2007 is the first year for JLC-prioritized objectives, 2006 was the start of this process coming together and saw the best year for veterans' legislation in recent memory. Notable was the passage of in-state tuition for active-duty military dependents -- a goal since the 1980s -- and approval of a long-needed veterans' cemetery in Southwest Virginia.

Other prominent items included significant increases in personnel funding to decrease disability-claims processing times, state funds for a third veterans' care center, and funding for Fisher House lodging for family members visiting their war-wounded loved ones recovering at McGuire Veterans Hospital.

The JLC's core 2007 objectives include two focused on veterans -- full funding for the Department of Veterans Services budget and clarification of the state's veterans hiring practices. Other objectives show strong veteran support for our forces engaged in the global War on Terror -- support for the Virginia National Guard's and Reserve's efforts to recruit and retain members and maintain their forces, expansion of in-state tuition for active-duty members, and tax exemptions for deployed forces. The JLC also supports a curb on payday lending, as the Department of Defense has addressed this as a major problem affecting readiness.

Indications are the final JLC objective funding for an education center at the Virginia War Memorial -- will be particularly difficult to pass. Veterans and supporters from across Virginia must voice their support to the governor and their General Assembly members to ensure funds are in the budget. The \$3.5 million in state funding is needed to help the Virginia War Memorial Foundation complete work on its education center. This is a \$6-million project, and the foundation is committed to raising the remaining funds from public donations. The space is needed to meet visitor demand generated by the foundation's critically acclaimed "Virginians at War" documentary film series that supports the Standards of Learning for all our middle and high schools.

Films Will Fill Void

The films are short interviews with Virginia veterans serving from World War II to the present. The films help fill a tremendous void in our education system about our military that keeps our nation free. This program has been so successful that school field trips, tours, and visitors to the War Memorial have increased 300 percent. The education center will provide a suitable venue for visitors and house Virginia war artifacts, the Memorial's library, and staff. This will pass only if the foundation can mobilize public support.

Join the fight, and urge your elected officials to support foundation funding. Go to the General Assembly Web site or call 1-800-889-0229. Be a part of Veterans Days at the General Assembly. American Legion members will be at the General Assembly on January 17, VFW on January 18, and MOAA on January 22. Contact your local post or chapter for the details. You can also take a personal role and make a tax-deductible donation to the VA War Memorial Foundation, 621 South Belvidere Street, Richmond, VA 23320. You will be helping to educate our young people about Virginians who have kept our country free and safe.

Bill Flanagan -- a retired Army colonel and a Vietnam veteran, with an Army son and USMC son-in-law engaged in the War on Terror -- has served on the Virginia War Memorial Foundation's board of trustees, is the president of the state leadership of the Military Officers Association of America, and is a member of several other veterans' organizations. His Commentary Columns regarding veterans' issues appear regularly on the Back Fence.

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